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Variations on romance themes in the *Historia Meriadoci*

Abstract: The little known Latin Arthurian narrative *Historia Meriadoci* presents many challenges. Was it written in the twelfth century, in which case it is an early example of Arthurian romance, or is it later, in which case it reflects already developed motifs? It uses numerous romance themes – separated family, dispossessed heir, young knight arriving at Arthur's court – but the protagonist leaves the Arthurian milieu quite early on, and pursues a military career more characteristic of epic on the continent. Arthur is presented in a rather disparaging light, as an unjust ruler (there is considerable emphasis on legal issues). This may reflect Welsh traditions in which he is not always an idealized king. But the story is written in Latin: who was the author, and what was the target audience? Does the fact that it was written in Latin, presumably for a largely clerical audience, explain the lack of interest in love, and in detailed accounts of courtly life, which one might expect to find in a vernacular romance? The author seems to draw on historical accounts of European wars as well as more legendary material. The mixture of romance and epic in this text may be compared with the Latin verse narrative *Ruodlieb*, produced in Germany in the late eleventh century. The *Ruodlieb* is much more elaborate in style and in plot, but also draws on a wide range of sources to produce a hybrid narrative which might be aimed at a similar audience, well-educated but ready to enjoy a range of heroic adventures, aware of Arthur but not averse to criticism of him.

Résumé: *Historia Meriadoci*, histoire arthurienne en latin, suscite beaucoup de problèmes. Cette œuvre a-t-elle été écrite au XIIème siècle? Si c'est le cas, est-elle un exemple précoce de roman arthurien? Ou a-t-elle été écrite plus tard, auquel cas elle réutilise des motifs déjà développés? Elle aborde de nombreux thèmes romanesques, comme ceux de la famille éclatée, du fils déshérité, du jeune chevalier qui arrive à la cour du roi Arthur. Néanmoins, le protagoniste quitte le milieu arthurien assez tôt pour poursuivre une carrière militaire, ce qui est plus caractéristique des chansons de gestes continentales. Arthur est dépeint sous un mauvais jour, apparaissant comme un roi injuste (l'auteur met l'accent sur les affaires juridiques). Ceci renvoie peut-être à la tradition galloise, où il n'est pas toujours le souverain idéal. Il n'en reste pas moins que l'histoire a été écrite en latin: par qui, et pour qui? Le choix du latin, visant vraisemblablement un public

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de clercs, explique-t-il le manque d'intérêt pour les histoires d'amour, et les récits détaillés de la vie courtoise que l'on trouve normalement dans les romans vernaculaires? Il semble que l'auteur s'inspire de récits historiques de guerres européennes, autant que d'histoires légendaires. Le mélange des caractéristiques romanesques et épiques dans ce texte invite à faire une comparaison avec *Ruodlieb*, une histoire latine en vers, écrite en Allemagne vers la fin du XIème siècle. L'intrigue et le style de *Ruodlieb* sont beaucoup plus élaborés que ceux de *Historia Meriadoci*. Cependant l'auteur de *Ruodlieb* s'inspire lui aussi d'une grande variété de sources, dans le but de créer une histoire hybride qui s'adresse au même public que *Historia Meriadoci*: un public bien instruit, mais enclin à apprécier les récits d'aventures héroïques, un public qui connaitrait le personnage d'Arthur mais qui serait prêt à accepter les critiques dont il peut faire l'objet.

Zusammenfassung: Die eher unbekannte lateinische Artuserzählung *Historia Meriadoci* stellt uns vor etliche Herausforderungen. Wurde sie im 12. Jahrhundert verfasst – und ist sie demnach ein frühes Beispiel der Artusromanzen – oder doch später, und ist sie somit ein Produkt etablierter Motive? Sie greift auf viele Themen der Romanzenliteratur zurück – die zersprengte Familie, der entrechtete Erbe, der junge Ritter am Artushof – und doch verlässt der Protagonist schon frühzeitig das Artusmilieu und folgt einer militärischen Laufbahn, die eher der kontinentalen Epik entspricht. König Artus wird eher unvorteilhaft als ungerechter Herrscher dargestellt (der Text befasst sich intensiv mit rechtlichen Gesichtspunkten). Dies geht möglicherweise auf walisische Traditionen zurück, aus denen Artus nicht immer als ein idealer König hervorgeht. Doch die Geschichte wurde auf Latein verfasst: wer waren Autor und beabsichtigtes Publikum? Erklärt der lateinische Text (und seine wahrscheinlich klerikale Zielgruppe) das mangelnde Interesse an Themen wie Liebe oder höfisches Leben, wie man sie in einer volkssprachlichen Romanze erwarten konnte? Der Autor bezieht sich offensichtlich auf historische Berichte europäischer Kriege wie auch Legendenmaterial. Die Mischung aus Epik und Romanze lässt sich mit der lateinischen Verserzählung *Ruodlieb*, verfasst in Deutschland im späten 11. Jahrhundert, vergleichen. *Ruodlieb* ist weitaus reichhaltiger sowohl in Stil als auch Handlung, benützt aber auch eine Vielzahl an Quellen, um mit einer hybriden Erzählung möglicherweise ein vergleichbares Publikum anzusprechen: ein gebildetes Publikum, das Heldenabenteuer genießt, Artus kennt, und mit Artuskritik zurechtkommt.

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The little known *Historia Meriadoci* is usually mentioned as one of a group of rather enigmatic Latin Arthurian romances (for want of a better descriptive category) which also includes the *De ortu Waluuanii nepotis Arturi (The Rise/Origins of Gawain Nephew of Arthur)*, *Narratio de Arthuro rege Britanniae et rege Gorlagon lycanthropo (The Story of King Arthur of Britain and King Gorlagon the Werewolf)*, and the quest for the sparrowhawk at the end of Book II of Andreas Capellanus' *De Amore (On Love* – also known as *The Art of Courtly Love)*.[1] There is considerable scholarly debate about the date and authorship of all these texts, and this uncertainty makes discussion of them particularly challenging. The *Historia Meriadoci* and the *De ortu* were known to the sixteenth-century bibliophile John Bale, who ascribed them both to Robert of Torigni (d. 1186), a Benedictine monk who was prior and librarian at Bec and abbot of Mont St Michel; we know that he had access there to a copy of Geoffrey of Monmouth's new work the *Historia regum Britanniae*, since he famously showed it to the astonished Henry of Huntingdon when the latter visited Bec in 1139.[2] Modern critics generally agree that the *Historia* and the *De ortu* are by the same author, but estimates of their date of composition vary from the mid-twelfth century to the early thirteenth century and even to the fourteenth century, on the basis of arguments including fashions in armour, the military travels of Richard the Lionheart, forest law, Edward I's besieging of Llewellyn, the phrasing of Magna Carta, and the possible authorship of Ranulph Higden.[3]

1 References to *De ortu*, *Historia Meriadoci* and *Arthur and Gorlagon* will be taken from the editions with facing English translation by Mildred Leake Day in *Latin Arthurian Literature*, Arthurian Archives 11 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), and cited parenthetically by page and line number (for the Latin); I have occasionally altered the translations slightly for greater accuracy. See also J. D. Bruce's introduction to his Historia Meriadoci *and* De Ortu Walwanii: *Two Latin Arthurian Romances of the XIIIth Century*, Hesperia 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1913), and *Arthur, Gauvain et Mériadoc: récits arthuriens latins du XIIIe siècle*, ed. by Philippe Walter and Jean-Charles Berthet (Grenoble: Ellug, 2007), with facing French translations; I am grateful to Dr Carolyne Larrington for bringing this French edition to my attention. In the present essay I expand my comments on the *Historia* in 'Arthurian Latin Romance', in *The Arthur of Medieval Latin Literature*, ed. by Siân Echard, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages VI (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), pp. 132–45.

2 R. H. Fletcher, *The Arthurian Material in the Chronicles* (Boston: Ginn, 1906), p. 120; Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England I: c.550-c.1307* (London: Routledge, 1974; rp.1996), pp. 199–200 and 261–63. See also Ad Putter, 'Latin Historiography after Geoffrey of Monmouth', in *The Arthur of Medieval Latin Literature*, ed. by Echard, pp. 85–108, especially pp. 86–87.

3 See for instance R.S. Loomis, 'The Latin Romances', in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 472–79, who argues for the thirteenth century; and Peter Larkin, 'A Suggested Author for *De ortu Waluuanii* and *Historia Meriadoci*': Ranulph Higden', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 103 (2004), 215–31. For a full survey of critical views

Siân Echard argues that they date from the later part of Henry II's reign (the third quarter of the twelfth century), and points out that at the Angevin court there was great interest in in narrative and the theme of good kingship, and a delight in satire and wit.[4] There also seems to have been an awareness at court that the new developments in vernacular literature were proving very popular, and providing competition for Latin. Michael Clanchy remarks that Walter Map's *De nugis curialium* 'was a flashy attempt to make modern Latin literature attractive' (though as John Gillingham has pointed out, it is striking that Map did not include any Arthurian tale).[5] If the Latin romances are indeed twelfth-century, they are important witnesses to an early phase in the evolution of the romance genre and of Arthurian romance in particular, and so might be quite innovative; they might also be part of a Plantagenet propaganda agenda, though according to John Gillingham this only began to include Arthur in the 1190s.[6] If they are thirteenth- or even fourteenth-century, on the other hand, they can be read as commenting on a popular and established form of narrative and its distinctive and characteristic motifs. A. G. Rigg, who has very little to say about Latin prose romances in his *History of Anglo-Latin Literature*, remarks that the *Historia Meriadoci* and the *De Ortu* can definitely be 'classified as romances', but adds that 'it is hard to resist the feeling that they are parodies'.[7] As he accepts the argument that they were written in the first half of the twelfth century, this view is somewhat problematic: what would be the romance tradition which they are parodying, if they were written before Chrétien? Or is Rigg implying that they are parodies of other, possibly oral, sources such as Welsh poems and tales? Whether or not they are parodies, these tantalising Latin texts raise challenging questions about authors and audiences, and literary cross-fertilization in a multilingual culture – and also about attitudes to kingship, to Arthur, and to romance themes such as separated families, usurped thrones, recognition scenes, the proving of a young knight, mysterious castles, judicial duels and abducted ladies. In this article I

see Mildred Leake Day's 'Introduction' in *Latin Arthurian Literature*, pp. 2–11. Some of the arguments will be discussed later in this essay.

4 Echard, *Arthurian Narrative in the Latin Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 18 and 132.

5 M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, 2nd edn (1979; Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 204; John Gillingham, 'The Cultivation of History, Legend and Courtesy at the Court of Henry II', in *Writers of the Reign of Henry II: Twelve Essays*, ed. by Ruth Kennedy and Simon Meecham-Jones (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 25–52 (see p. 37).

6 Gillingham, 'The Cultivation of History', p. 38.

7 A. G. Rigg, *A History of Anglo-Latin Literature 1066–1422* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 51.

shall consider the extent to which the *Historia Meriadoci* conforms to romance conventions, and suggest that being written in Latin places it in an interesting category of hybrid 'romances' which seem to have circulated well before Chrétien.

The *Historia Meriadoci* survives in two manuscripts: the early fourteenth-century London, British Library Cotton Faustina B VI, which also contains the *De ortu* (together with annals, papal letters, and other ecclesiastical notices), and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson B 149, late fourteenth to early fifteenth century. The Oxford MS also contains *Arthur and Gorlagon*, and the stories of Apollonius of Tyre and of Alexander (*De preliis*); a compiler might well have thought it appropriate to add a romance with an Arthurian dimension to this group of very popular adventure narratives. Both the *Historia Meriadoci* and the *De ortu* describe a young knight winning his spurs, with adventures both on the continent and in Britain, but the pattern of events differs considerably in the two romances. Meriadoc is on the periphery of the Arthurian world; his brief stay at Arthur's court leads to one of many adventures, but not the conclusive or final one. In the *De ortu*, Gawain is a Fair Unknown, Arthur's long-lost nephew, and so his coming-of-age story has stronger resonances and links both with the Arthurian world and with other Arthurian texts. In both narratives, Arthur comes in for some criticism. In the *De ortu* he is made to look ridiculous in various ways: first he is unhorsed at a ford by the newly arrived Gawain; then when he returns soaking wet he is mocked by his second-sighted queen for his feeble explanatory fib; and finally he is easily routed by an enemy who has beaten him many times before at the northern Castle of Maidens, where Gawain mocks his cowardice. Nevertheless, the Arthurian court frames the story: Gawain leaves it as an illegitimate baby, and returns to it as an acclaimed champion after his continental exploits to learn his true identity and be reunited with his long-lost parents (though he does not end up with a wife).

In the *Historia Meriadoci*, however, Arthur is much more marginal. The prologue suggests that the extant text is based on a much longer version (this is of course a common medieval conceit and does not necessarily mean that such a source actually existed):

> Incipit prologus R. in *Historia Meriadoci regis Kambrie*.
> Memoratu dignam dignum duxi exarare historiam, cuius textus tantarum probitatum tantique leporis decoratur titulis, ut si singula seriatim percurrerem, faui dulcorem in fastidium uerterem. Legentium igitur consulens utilitati, illam compendioso perstringere stilo statui, sciens quod maioris sit precii breuis cum sensu oracio, quam multiflua racione uacans locucio. (ed. by Day, p. 122.1–7)
> The prologue by R. introduces the history of Meriadoc, King of Cambria.
> I have deemed it worthy to write [this] story worthy of remembrance, the text of which is embellished with tales of such prowess and such excellence that if I plodded through

> each episode one by one I should turn the sweetness of its honey into surfeit. Therefore, taking into account the benefit of [my] readers, I set out to confine it to a concise style, knowing that a pithy discourse that makes sense is worth more than a rambling tale empty of meaning. (tr. Day, p. 123, adapted)

It is striking that R (which could stand for Robert) expects to be read rather than heard ('legentium igitur consulens utilitati'). The tone and style seem quite similar to the epilogue of the *De ortu*, where the writer recommends those who want to know more of Gawain's adventures to demand more stories 'a scienti' (from one who knows), by pleading or paying; he then adds that it is harder to compose an eloquent written narrative than 'uulgari propalare sermone' (ed. by Day, pp. 120.17/121, to relate it orally in the words of common speech [Rigg: to relate it in the vernacular]). Does this indicate that the writer has drawn on French or possibly Welsh sources, oral or written, or is it just a topos? And is this an indicator of early composition? Rigg comments à propos the rarity of Latin romances that 'The Latin language itself may have raised cultural expectations above the level of pure entertainment'.[8] One argument against Robert's authorship is the stylistic difference between the two romances and his chronicle, but Pio Rajna, accepting the attribution to Robert, suggested that he might have composed them before he became an abbot in 1154, at which point romance writing might have become inappropriate for him.[9]

Like *De ortu*, the *Historia Meriadoci* begins with Uther as king, rather than Arthur. In the *De ortu* Arthur rules all Britannia, but in the *Historia Meriadoci* it is divided into three separate kingdoms, Cambria, Albany and Logres, 'before the time that King Arthur secured the monarchy of all Britain', so Arthur is one of several kings (presumably he rules Logres, though this is not specified).[10] The plot is very complex, and defies brief summary:

8 Rigg, *Anglo-Latin Literature*, p. 48.

9 Pio Rajna, 'Per le origini et la storia primitiva del Ciclo brettone', *Studi Medievali* 3 (1930), 201–57 (see pp. 236–37). See also Rajna, 'Sono il *De Ortu Walwanii* e l'*Historia Meriadoci* Opera di un medesimo Autore?', in *Medieval Studies in Memory of Gertrude Schoepperle Loomis*, ed. by R. S. Loomis (Paris: Champion, 1927), pp. 1–20.

10 Bruce argues against a Welsh source for the opening ('Introduction', pp. xxiv–xxvii). Might it be derived from the description of Brutus' three sons dividing the kingdom in Geoffrey's *Historia*, ii.1 (trans. Lewis Thorpe [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966], p. 75)? Several names could be derived from Geoffrey, who makes Caradocus king of Britain under Maximianus, and a contemporary of Conanus Meriadocus; Conanus fights Maximianus, but is then reconciled with him, and conquers and rules Brittany (Armorica); see *Historia*, v.9–14, trans. Thorpe, pp. 134–41, and Day, 'Introduction', p. 27.

When the king of Cambria dies, he is succeeded by his sons, Caradoc (as the main king) and Griffin. Griffin has Caradoc killed and usurps the throne. He plots to have Caradoc's twin children, Meriadoc and Orwen, killed too, but they are rescued by their fosterparents Ivor and Morwen. They all live in the forest for five years, till Orwen is abducted by Urien, who subsequently marries her, and Meriadoc by Kay, who takes him to Arthur's court. Ivor and Morwen search for the children, and within a few years are reunited with them. The children are eager for vengeance against their uncle and appeal to Arthur, who besieges Griffin and has him tried and beheaded.

Meriadoc is made King of Cambria, but is keen to win his spurs. He champions Arthur against the Black Knight of the Black Forest, who claims ownership of the forest, and defeats his opponent after thirty-eight of Arthur's knights have failed. He restores the forest to the Black Knight, and the same scenario is repeated when he fights the Red Knight of the Red Forest and the White Knight of the White Forest. Meriadoc then sets out to serve the Emperor of the Alemanni, whose daughter has been abducted by Gundebald, King of the Land from Which No One Returns. Soon he is in charge of all the Emperor's mercenaries. He defeats Gundebald's invading army, and then finds himself with his men on a plain where a huge castle has mysteriously appeared. Inside he dines with a beautiful lady who tells him she knows him; no one else in the castle speaks. Meriadoc and his men flee, overcome with panic; they find another mysterious castle, where Meriadoc behaves very boorishly, stealing food from a maiden and then from the kitchen, drowning one huge man who tries to stop him and driving away another. Again his men panic and flee. After helping a woman avenge the killing of her husband by thieves, he hears sounds of battle and rejoins the Emperor's forces: they defeat the army of Gundebald's brother.

Meriadoc is determined to rescue the Emperor's daughter; at her urging he succeeds in entering incognito the castle where she is held, and kills the gatekeeper as she watches. The princess has been left in charge of the castle; following her advice, Meriadoc defeats Gundebald in a battle by a quicksand, and Gundebald's men offer him the throne, agreeing to surrender to the Emperor as long as the princess marries Meriadoc. Meanwhile the King of Gaul invades the Emperor's lands, and the Emperor, forced to agree a treaty which includes the marriage of his daughter to the King, plots to entrap Meriadoc. Pretending to arrange the wedding, the Emperor allows Meriadoc to visit his daughter, but then announces publicly that she is pregnant and Meriadoc must be punished. The princess is horrified; the King of Gaul, learning of the pregnancy, breaks off the engagement and annuls the treaty, so the war begins again. Meriadoc escapes from a tower, borrows armour and a horse, and kills the Emperor. The King, having heard of Meriadoc's prowess, gives him the princess along with great estates, and a son is born to the young couple.

There are sufficient similarities in style between the *Historia Meriadoci* and *De ortu* to have persuaded the few critics who have discussed them that they are by the same author, but they also differ in numerous respects. While the *De ortu* is in many ways a typical Fair Unknown story, taking the hero from clandestine birth to acceptance as a top knight at the greatest court in the world, the *Historia Meriadoci* seems to combine motifs from various types of romance, and also from other genres, in an unusual arrangement.

The opening section describing the attempt to assassinate Meriadoc and his sister by their wicked and usurping uncle, their miraculous rescue, their subsequent abductions, and their reunion, is reminiscent of Anglo-Norman and later Middle English romances such as *Havelok the Dane* and *King Horn* in which disinherited princes grow up to reclaim their kingdoms. (The elaborate method of cooking employed by Ivor in the wilderness [pp. 136.32–138.15], involving a series of pits and drains which carry hot water from a vast bonfire, seems to be added, like the Greek fire episode in *De ortu*, to show off arcane technical knowledge; this may be a feature of Latin romance, aimed at a clerical audience.) But whereas similar accounts of family betrayal, separation and reunion constitute a complete romance in other narratives, in *Meriadoc* they represent only the *hors d'oeuvre* (there are other examples of this structure, for instance *Valentine and Orson*, though more is made there of the early adventures of the protagonists). In a number of separated family stories the lost children are twins or triplets – *Lai le Freine*, *Octavian*, *Sir Isumbras*, *Valentine and Orson* – but I know no other example of twin brother and sister.[11] They are not babies when they are abducted, and Orwen is a remarkably compliant abductee: we are told that she herself alerts her abductor Urien when she reaches 'nubilem etatem' (p. 140.19–20; marriageable age). It is very unusual for parents (or in this case foster parents) in romance to search for their lost children; and here they are found very quickly and easily, within a couple of years. Morwen had heard Kay call Urien's name as they parted, and Ivor the huntsman recognized Kay as a familiar member of Arthur's court. The faithful foster parents go on separate quests: Morwen arrives in Scotland on the day of Orwen's wedding, is recognized, and becomes Orwen's servant (pp. 140–42). Similarly, when Ivor arrives at Arthur's court, Meriadoc recognizes him at once and rushes to him;[12] Ivor becomes Kay's servant (p. 143). This all happens very quickly, with no detail about their quests, and no adventures en route. So the recognition scenes are unproblematic, almost comically so; the abductors are well-known figures in the Arthurian world, the rescuers know where to find them, and the family reunion comes very early in the story. But it is a reunion with foster parents (the biological mother plays no part in the story), and the married foster

11 On these romances see W. R. J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (London: Longman, 1987), and on romance motifs more generally Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

12 Echard notes that Ivor arrives rather like the Green Knight at Camelot in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: he is a huge man carrying a deer carcase, which he lays at Kay's feet (*Arthurian Narrative*, pp. 182–83).

parents are then separated, one staying as servant at each of the courts; no more is heard of them. Is this section intended to be parodic?

We hear no more of Orwen either after this opening; it is indeed the history of Meriadoc. Arthur helps with the vengeance on their wicked uncle Griffin, who is defeated and beheaded within two pages. But then Meriadoc walks away from his rightful throne and sets out to prove himself as a knight in a series of judicial duels on behalf of Arthur. He fights against the Black, Red and White Knights (pp. 148 ff.), a trio who particularly irritated Bruce: 'Nothing, perhaps, so insipid or absurd can be found even in Arthurian fiction as these knights with their preposterous names'.[13] The introduction to this set of challenges notes that Arthur was in residence in the (unspecified) city, 'liber parumper a bellorum inquietudinibus' (p. 148.13–14, free for a while from the stress of war), and that in these circumstances 'semper tociens alicuius quidam magni ei negocii occurrebat euentus' (p. 148.15–16, some event of great significance would always occur). Does this relate to Wace's placing of the time of romance adventures in the years free of war during Arthur's reign?[14] This might suggest a relatively early date of composition. On the other hand, during the days of the duels Arthur fasts, and on the day when Meriadoc fights he makes the rest of the court fast too. Is this a forerunner of a motif found in the more developed romance tradition, that Arthur will not eat till an adventure has appeared, or is it a later variation on it (perhaps the motif appeared earlier in Welsh oral tales)?

All three adversaries claim that Arthur has treated them unjustly; legal terminology and allusion are frequently used in this section. The Black Knight claims that the Black Forest is his and has been unjustly appropriated by Arthur; Arthur replies that Uther had stocked two kinds of black boar in the forest, ancestors of all the existing swine there (p. 148.20–24). This claim to a practical sort of evidence sounds realistic. The Black Knight declares that 'censura iusticie' (p. 148.28, the authority of justice) will side with him. When they cannot agree, the matter is referred to Arthur's lords, but the Black Knight, fearing bias, demands a judicial duel, and not just one duel, but daily for forty days with forty different champions. Thirty-seven of Arthur's knights are defeated: lamenting that his reputation is ruined, he plans to send Kay and then Gawain, and finally if necessary to go himself. It is at this point that Meriadoc steps in to replace his abductor-turned-mentor, Kay. Judicial duels were common in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, often in relation to treason and to the theft of substantial amounts of property,

13 Bruce, 'Introduction', p. xxxii.

14 See Ad Putter, 'Finding Time for Romance: Medieval Arthurian Literary History', *Medium Ævum* 63 (1994), 1–16.

but there was considerable clerical hostility to the practice, and increasingly royal hostility too.[15] In the *Historia* it is not just a question of one duel, but of forty champions over forty days: is this meant to be ironic, comic or parodic? The adventure does not turn out quite as Arthur had hoped. When Meriadoc returns to court after defeating the Black Knight, he tells Arthur that he has won the case for him (p. 156.31, 'causam decreui'); he then rebukes the king at some length for his unjust behaviour, claiming that his main concern has been to save a noble man from being destroyed by the king's legal action (p. 158.8, 'ne suo iure nobilem uirem contigat destitui'), and urges Arthur to return the Black Knight's property. The king demurs and gives it to Meriadoc, who immediately makes it over to its original owner, with the approval of the court. Echard comments that 'Arthur continues to sink in the reader's estimation by comparison when he refuses to accept Meriadoc's request'.[16]

Legal matters feature frequently in French romances, according to Howard Bloch:

> The discourse of the literary text and that of the customal demonstrate a degree of thematic and stylistic commingling that cannot be ignored. There are few sustained narrative works belonging to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that do not contain a trial.[17]

Forests figure frequently in romances too, of course, but the issue of royal forests and hunting rights was prominent in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Corinne Saunders notes in her study of the forest in romance that 'the extraction of fines for the use of the forest had become an important source of revenue for the English monarchy, as well as a means of limiting the power of the nobility and the monasteries'.[18] This was an issue in the time of Henry II: indeed, Robert of Torigni notes in his chronicle that in 1175 Henry withdrew the amnesty for the clergy in relation to forest law. It is very tempting to deduce from this that Robert would have had a good reason for showing Arthur rebuked for his injustice to the Black Knight, but King John also caused many complaints, and forest law was

15 See Robert Bartlett, 'Trial by Battle', in *Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 103–26. Echard cites Warren's argument that forest law was 'the problem around which the developing Angevin legal system was built', and notes that from 1179 cases of land right could be settled by trial by jury, rather than the older system of trial by battle; see *Arthurian Narrative*, pp. 172–73.

16 Echard, *Arthurian Narrative*, p. 174; one might compare Marie de France's portrayal of an unjust Arthur in *Lanval*.

17 R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval French Literature and Law* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1977), p. 4.

18 Corinne Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), p. 9.

a part of Magna Carta, followed by the Forest Charter of 1217. For this and other reasons David W. Porter has argued that the *Historia Meriadoci* must have been written in the first third of the thirteenth century; he notes that 'the outcome of the case of the Black Forest represents the ideal from the baronial point of view: the Black Knight has the land as a freehold, owes the king no hunting privileges, and has to buy no liberties'.[19] Porter concludes that Robert of Torigni cannot be the author, not only because of the date, but also because of the stress on this baronial/royal conflict: he does not see the *Historia* as a polemic, but considers that it has 'absorbed ideology from the ether'.[20] In Porter's view the author was either a member of the nobility or someone in a baronial household; he remarks that in its emphasis on law and legal phrasing this episode of the *Historia* shows the influence of the world of writing, not just oral tradition, though of course we cannot know how much and in what ways the author might have been embroidering an existing source, written or oral, Latin or vernacular.

After defeating all three knights and resolving their disputes, Meriadoc seeks out 'quenam terrarum regio bellorum subiaceret legibus' (p. 160.17, what region of the earth was undergoing the judicial ordeal of war). Martin Aurell, who argues that the Plantagenets made ample use of the Arthurian legend for propaganda purposes, describes Meriadoc misleadingly as 'another champion of Arthur, with whose help he avenged the murder of his father', but this only represents a small fraction of the total plot.[21] Fighting for Arthur is just the beginning of Meriadoc's career, and there is no Arthurian frame, as in *De ortu*. Meriadoc never returns to Britain: after his success with the Black, Red and White Knights, he is keen 'ad inquirendam et exercendam miliciam' (p. 160.11–12, to search out and perform deeds of knighthood). It seems that to do this he must go to the continent, handing over Cambria to Urien – this is the reverse of what happens in so many Arthurian romances. He gets involved in full scale wars, rather than quests; the genre seems to shift from romance to epic. It is striking that when Meriadoc infiltrates Gundebald's city, he describes himself and his companions as having long served the king of Britannia (pp. 184.24–25, 'regi Britannie diu militauimus'); Britain now seems to be united under a single king, but he is not named as Arthur, which is surprising, and perhaps contemptuous, nor has Meriadoc in fact served him long. Judith Weiss points out that in Wace's *Roman de Brut*, breaches of *dreit* are frequently mentioned in critical comment on Arthur's invasion of France; she

19 David W. Porter, 'The *Historia Meriadoci* and Magna Carta', *Neophilologus* 76 (1992), 136–46 (p. 142). See also Day, 'Introduction', pp. 26–27.

20 Porter, 'The *Historia Meriadoci*', p. 144.

21 Martin Aurell, *The Plantagenet Empire*, trans. David Crouch (Harlow: Pearson, 2007), p. 148.

refers briefly to the treatment of Arthur in the *Historia Meriadoci* and also the *De ortu* (both of which she dates to the late twelfth century) as examples of 'the age's equivocal attitudes to the exercise of supreme power', and she also notes that twelfth-century insular attitudes to the Holy Roman Emperors were fairly negative, 'mirroring continental resentment at German arrogance and political dominance'.[22]

The rest of the narrative focuses on continental wars, shifting from romance to epic and apparently drawing on fifth-century history and the power struggle between Gundebald of Burgundy and the Alemanni, a struggle which was resolved by Clovis' victory at the battle of Tolbiac in 496. This is all recounted in Gregory of Tours, a source certainly known to Robert of Torigni via Sigebert of Gembloux, whose chronicle he continued. It is noteworthy that the *De ortu* also draws on fifth-century history as reported by Sigebert, this time the war between Rome and Persia, in which the young Gawain has a leading part. Robert would certainly have been in a position to adapt these two historical events into the romance narratives. As far as the *Historia Meriadoci* is concerned, though, a struggle between the rulers of Germany and France might have had some more immediate resonances in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century. Frederick Barbarossa, Holy Roman Emperor of Germany, was married to a Burgundian princess. His enemy Henry the Lion of Saxony was married to Matilda, daughter of Henry II of England, and spent three years in exile in England in the 1180s. Eventually Henry's son Otto became Emperor, but was defeated by Philip Augustus of France. All this might give an extra edge to the defeat of the German Emperor in the *Historia Meriadoci*, specially for a thirteenth-century audience.

Meriadoc distinguishes himself on the continent through both his cunning and his prowess, but it is striking that the princess he wants to rescue is given a major role, and a lot of power (this might suggest an early date of composition – Judith Weiss has argued that wooing women who are resourceful and take the initiative appear more in earlier romances than in later ones).[23] In both the *Historia Meriadoci* and the *De ortu* a high-status lady is abducted (see *De ortu*, ed. by Day, pp. 74–87); but the abductors treat their victims with great respect, it seems, and the ladies are given considerable freedom compared with better known romance abductees such as Guinevere. However, the writer of the *Historia Meriadoci* treats

22 Judith Weiss, 'Arthur, Emperors, and Antichrists: The Formation of the Arthurian Biography', in *Writers of the Reign of Henry II*, ed. by Kennedy and Meecham-Jones, pp. 239–48 (see pp. 243–44, and p. 241).

23 Judith Weiss, 'The Wooing Woman in Anglo-Norman Romance', in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. by Maldwyn Mills et al. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), pp. 149–61.

love more pragmatically than romantically. In *De ortu*, Gawain rescues the kidnapped niece of the Roman Emperor, but there is no spark of romance between them. In the *Historia Meriadoci*, the abducted princess (who has no name) corresponds secretly with Meriadoc, having heard of his prowess; curiously, in the absence of her abductor she is 'the acting administrator of the city' (p. 186.29, 'ut domina urbi presidet'), and so is able to entertain Meriadoc for three days, and give him detailed instructions about defeating Gundebald and liberating her. We are not told that she is in love with him, nor he with her, though once she is freed and back in her father's city, spies report to the Emperor that when Meriadoc and the princess are alone together, they embrace passionately (p. 198). The story ends with their marriage, but love has been a very minor factor in Meriadoc's adventures, as have his dealings with Arthur. It would not have been surprising had Meriadoc liberated the princess and then moved on, as Gawain does in the *De ortu*.

Some of the earlier interludes on the continent seem drawn from the world of romance, most notably the strange episodes of the two castles, which begin with the sun seeming to rise much too quickly after the previous evening (p. 166.9ff).[24] The first castle appears out of nowhere on a great plain previously empty; the lady in charge, who may be Fortuna, welcomes Meriadoc familiarly, but none of her servants will speak to him, and when Meriadoc inquires of a seneschal who she is and whether she is married, the seneschal mocks him rudely, not speaking but making vulgar faces at him. Fear overcomes Meriadoc and his men and they flee, losing over fifty of the company in the process. Next they come to another castle where they are told no one can enter who does not return shamed (p. 172.18–20). There too they feel a mysterious sense of panic. Meriadoc behaves very badly, stealing food from the table of a lady, and throwing down a well an attacker encountered while snatching more food from the kitchen. A huge man rebukes Meriadoc for his bad behaviour; again his men are unnerved and flee. This episode is described in some detail, but nothing more comes of it; there is no subsequent explanation, and no comeuppance for Meriadoc though he has behaved boorishly, like the young Perceval. Meriadoc redeems himself slightly by helping a woman to avenge the death of her husband, but this is a perfunctory episode, one short paragraph without any detail. After this, we return to a more epic mode as Meriadoc finds a battle in progress between the Emperor and Gundebald. Mysterious castles do appear in the romance tradition, but here there

24 Roseanna Cross discusses the romance motif of a mysterious shift in time in '"Heterochronia" in *Thomas of Erceldoune, Guingamor*, 'The Tale of King Herla', and *The Story of Meriadoc, King of Cambria*', *Neophilologus* 92:1 (2008), 163–75 (see pp. 170–73).

seems to be a significant disjunction between the romance and epic parts of the story, with no attempt to fill in gaps or rationalize them.

The *Historia Meriadoci*, like the other Latin Arthurian narratives, is as problematic as it is intriguing. We might read them very differently if we were confident of when they were written: are they early witnesses to the evolution of romance and the Arthurian legend, or later witnesses to the popularity of certain characterizations and motifs? Composition in Latin indicates that they are aimed at an élite and largely ecclesiastical audience; would such an audience be less likely to subscribe to the idealization of the Arthurian world, and would this audience prefer epic heroes without elaborate romance plots? There certainly are a number of romance elements in the *Historia Meriadoci*, as in the *De ortu*, but these elements seem to be played down, obscured partly by brevity and lack of follow-up, and partly by the amount of activity more typical of epic. To what extent were some or all of these texts influenced by Welsh traditions? Sîan Echard has argued that *Arthur and Gorlagon* is based on a Welsh source, which would account for some striking stylistic features.[25] Might Welsh influence account for the rather dismissive portrayal of Arthur in the *Historia* too? Oliver Padel has suggested that in the Welsh tradition Arthur may have been rather undignified, even a comic character, with whom the audience would not expect to sympathize; this might explain the curious presentation of Arthur here and in the other Latin romances (and also in Chrétien, where the king is sometimes inappropriate and inept).[26] But Bruce in his edition stresses that there is no Meriadoc in the early history of Wales, nor does there seem to be a connection with the Meriadoc of the French romance *Chevalier aux deus epees*.[27] Caradawc is a son of Bran in Welsh legend, and a Caradoc appears in Chrétien's *Erec*, but there is no historical equivalent for the story of Caradoc and Griffin; Urien's wife is usually Morgan, or in Welsh tradition Modron, whereas in the *Historia Meriadoci* she is Orwen. Bruce concludes that 'the well-known names of Arthurian saga have been utilized to give *éclat* to a story which originally had no connection with it'.[28] Certainly the story seems to fall into two halves: a story with strong romance elements about the rise of an orphan who becomes Arthur's champion and takes vengeance on his

25 Echard, *Arthurian Narrative,* pp. 193 ff.

26 Oliver Padel, *Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature*, Writers of Wales series (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 123. There is also some comment on the lack of royal control of the court in Walter Map.

27 Bruce, 'Introduction', p. xxvi. On the name Caradoc see Rachel Bromwich, 'First Transmission to England and France', in *The Arthur of the Welsh*, ed. by R. Bromwich et al., Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages I (Cardiff: University of Wales Press,1991), pp. 273–98 (pp. 279–81).

28 Bruce, 'Introduction', p. xvii.

father's murderer; and the more epic tale of the rise of a mercenary who makes his name and wins his bride in the German-French wars. Linking them, according to Echard, is a persistent interest in kingship: 'The text would seem to be suggesting that no ruler can be perfect, because all are human; and this must include Britain's greatest king'.[29]

The first half of Meriadoc's story contains many typical romance motifs – the usurping uncle, the abductions and family reunion, the early test in the judicial duel; but his adventures on the continent as a mercenary seem much less typical of romance, even though he does win a princess and great estates. A surprisingly early precedent for this sort of hybrid narrative is the fragmentary *Ruodlieb*, probably composed in the monastery at Tegernsee about 1070.[30] This understudied Latin poem starts in the epic mode with the hero leaving home because of a slight and fighting for the unnamed Rex Maior, an exemplary king, against the less admirable Rex Minor. Ruodlieb does well, and returns home laden with both advice and gifts. On the journey home his nephew falls in love with a young girl. The charming account of their courtship and wedding anticipates later romance motifs; it gives remarkable prominence to the emotions of the young pair, and to the girl's spirited comments on her expectations of marriage – she has no intention of being subservient. However when Ruodlieb seeks a wife, he is disillusioned to find that his apparently eligible candidate already has a lover; this episode smacks of clerical misogyny. The final fragment returns to epic mode as a dwarf promises to help Ruodlieb defeat two kings and win an heiress as his bride. The *Ruodlieb* contains some erudite technology, like the *De ortu* and the *Historia Meriadoci*: Ruodlieb uses the herb bugloss to bring fish to the surface, and there are instructions for making a jewel from lynx urine. It may be that this is a hallmark of clerical romance writing. Unusually, the *Ruodlieb* also includes many descriptions of people, places, clothes and food, whereas the Latin Arthurian romances are notably sparse in this respect. Perhaps this lack of description is another characteristic of romance in Latin. It is certainly true of the early and enduringly popular *Historia Apollonii regis Tyri* (*Apollonius of Tyre*), which includes some romance elements, such as separated family, false death, recognition scenes and lovesickness, but no fighting; this terse prose narrative is listed

29 Echard, *Arthurian Narrative*, p. 191.

30 See *Ruodlieb*, ed. and trans. by C. W. Grocock (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1985), and Archibald, '*Ruodlieb* and Romance in Latin: Audience and Authorship', forthcoming in *Telling the Story in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Evelyn Birge Vitz*, ed. by Laurie Postlewate, Kathryn A. Duys and Elizabeth Emery (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2015).

in a number of monastic library catalogues before the 'rise of romance' in the twelfth century.[31]

It is clear that writers and readers of Latin were interested not only in epic narratives but also in the martial and (to some extent) amorous adventures of individual knights, drawing on both learned and oral traditions. Bruce considered the *Historia* and the *De ortu* to be full of Arthurian motifs and commonplaces; however, in the recent French edition Walter remarks on their independence from Geoffrey and from the French romance tradition derived from his *Historia*, in particular.[32] As I stressed before, attitudes to this issue depend heavily on the dating of the texts. Discussing the emergence of the figure of Arthur as 'a national redeemer' in Latin writing, rather than 'Welsh or British tradition', Simon Meecham-Jones comments that 'the Romances display many of the inconsistencies and anxieties inherent in this melting together of ideas from unrelated discourses'.[33] The *Historia Meriadoci*, like the other Latin Arthurian romances, seems to show such 'inconsistencies and anxieties' and a 'melting together of ideas from unrelated discourses'. Arthur's court is a magnet for young warriors, but it is also one that they may leave behind forever in search of further adventure overseas. Arthur is not always successful in his wars and quests, and can be cricitized with impunity by young knights beginning their careers. Was the writer clerical or lay, French or English, twelfth-century or thirteenth-century (fourteenth-century seems very unlikely)? There is a heavy emphasis on law and justice in the plot, which might imply a baronial household, as Porter suggests, but Echard also argues that the story is intended to challenge audiences and readers intellectually:[34]

> Taken together, the two texts [*Historia Meriadoci* and *De ortu*] display significant evidence of a deliberate manipulation of convention and expectation ... In both texts, the ability to distinguish appearance from reality through the correct reading of signs both visual and linguistic is called into question ... These difficulties are often encountered in the world of the court, and *Meriadoc* in particular highlights the dangers of the deceptive discourse practiced there.

Echard links these characteristics to the mid-twelfth-century Angevin court, but the difficulty remains that at this point romance was in its infancy (at least French

31 See Elizabeth Archibald, *Apollonius of Tyre: Medieval and Renaissance Themes and Variations* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991).

32 Bruce, 'Introduction', pp. xxxii and lvi–lx; Walter, 'Introduction' to *Arthur, Gauvain et Mériadoc*, p. 20; see also his remarks on *De ortu*, pp. 16–17.

33 Simon Meecham-Jones, 'Introduction' to *Writers of the Reign of Henry II,* ed. Kennedy and Meecham-Jones, pp. 1–24 (see p. 17).

34 Echard, *Arthurian Narrative*, pp. 191–92.

romance). The challenge for modern readers of the *Historia Meriadoci* is to decide when this tantalizing narrative was written, and what sources and analogues, romance or other, would have been known to its author and early readers/audiences. In view of the author's evident interest in legal matters, it seems appropriate to say that the jury is still out, and is likely to remain out for a long time to come.